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U.S.:

Activist Groups Press for Sticks Against Khartoum

Jim Lobe\*

**WASHINGTON, Dec 15 (IPS) -** Despite major progress in recent days in forging an agreement over a 2011 referendum on independence for south Sudan, activist groups here are calling on President Barack Obama to impose tough new sanctions against the government in Khartoum.

In an open letter sent to Obama Tuesday, some 50 activist groups from around the U.S. said that violence used by government security forces against peaceful protestors over the past week in Khartoum demonstrated that the regime could not be trusted and that Washington should immediately take measures against it.

They were joined by several congressmen who called on Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to become more actively engaged in Sudan policy, which so far has been delegated to Obama's special envoy, Gen. (ret.) Scott Gration, who has been widely assailed by human rights and other groups for being too conciliatory toward Khartoum.

"While there have been times in the months since Gen. Scott Gration's appointment that I have been concerned by the direction that this administration appeared to be taking in Sudan, I refrained from any public criticism not wanting to do anything that could jeopardise peace or progress," said Republican Rep. Frank Wolf.

"But I can be silent no longer. The time has come for Secretary Clinton and President Obama to personally and actively engage on Sudan," added Wolf, who was joined at a conference by fellow-Republican, Rep. Christopher Smith and Democratic Rep. Donald Payne.

The new push for sanctions comes amid preparations for country-wide elections next April and the much-anticipated 2011 referendum that will decide whether south Sudan, the site of much of the country's lucrative oil industry, secedes or remains within the union.

The referendum was a key provision of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended a 23-year-old civil war between the Arab-led government in Khartoum and the African-led Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). Some two million people, mostly southerners, are estimated to have died in the conflict.

The CPA was mediated by the U.S., Britain, Norway, and Sudan's neighbours. It has emerged as a major priority - along with ending violence and what both the administration and activist groups have called "genocide" in Darfur - for Washington over the past year, as tensions between the SPLM and the government led by the Islamist National Congress Party (NCP) have risen.

Indeed, there is growing suspicion here that Khartoum is secretly arming rival ethnic and tribal groups in the south, as it did beginning in 2003 in Darfur, to foment violence and chaos in the region in hopes of scuttling the CPA and hence the possibility of secession.

The humanitarian group Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) released a report Monday about inter-tribal violence that has killed at least 2,000 people and displaced another 250,000 in the south during 2009.

Nonetheless, the State Department said Tuesday it hoped that the agreement reached by the government and the SPLM over the weekend on three of five outstanding issues - notably that the south can secede if a majority of at least 60 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots for independence - will help ease tensions.

Indeed, a boycott of the national parliament by SPLM members was ended Tuesday.

"The parties should be commended for making hard decisions regarding difficult issues on which Special Envoy Gration has been engaging them to resolve," said a State Department spokesman.

"This is a significant step, and (Gration) will continue engaging the parties today on the remaining issues," he added. "It is critical that the parties resolve these remaining issues in a timely manner."

But the activist groups, which include, among others, the Save Darfur coalition, the Genocide Intervention Network, a number of church and Jewish groups, and even actress Mia Farrow, remain unpersuaded that the NCP government, which is led by President Omar al-Bashir, is acting in good faith. They pointed to the past week's repression and arrests of demonstrators, including several high-ranking SPLM officials, as evidence.

Al-Bashir was indicted last March by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes and crimes against humanity for his role in the Darfur conflict in which at least 200,000 people are believed to have died and nearly two million more made homeless.

"The fact that the government violently quelled a peaceful demonstration the day after announcing this agreement demonstrates that it will not honour the reform of Sudanese laws necessary for credible elections," said Mohamed Suleiman, a Darfuri who spoke for the activist groups at Tuesday's press conference.

"Sunday's agreements between the NCP and the SPLM are important pre-conditions for the referendum," said John Prendergast, co-founder of the Enough! Project.

"However, the conditions to hold a credible election are still not in place," he added. "The U.S. should suspend its assistance for the election and make clear that we are not going to underwrite an unfree and unfair election."

The State Department spokesman also deplored the government's recent actions, which began last week, against the SPLM and other demonstrators.

"We're deeply concerned about renewed violence against and detentions of protestors today in Khartoum," he said. "We strongly condemn any and all use of violence and call for the respect for freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and protection from arbitrary arrests and detentions. These are fundamental human rights that must be respected."

In their letter, the groups called for Obama to "lead the United States and the broader international community in applying the pressures necessary to ensure that the conditions for credible elections mandated by the CPA are enacted and implemented without further delay".

They also urge the administration to "act immediately to secure multilateral asset freezes and travels bans on NCP leaders, multilateral support of the (ICC) cases against key Sudanese officials, multilateral enforcement of the UN Security Council arms embargo; and denial of multilateral debt relief (for the government)".

They also called for Obama to instruct Gration to inform relevant committees in Congress regarding a classified annex to the administration's five-page Sudan policy paper released in October.

The annex reportedly includes a list of carrots and sticks the administration is prepared to use to induce Khartoum's cooperation with Washington's main policy goals in Sudan, including compliance with the CPA, ending violence in Darfur, and working with U.S. counterterrorist efforts.

Asked about the annex at a highly contentious hearing earlier this month, Gration denied its existence, only to be publicly contradicted last Friday by Washington's U.N. ambassador, Susan Rice. A long-time hawk on Sudan, Rice has reportedly been the principal critic within the administration of Gration's conciliatory approach toward the Khartoum regime.

Despite Gration's presence in Khartoum, activists have been encouraged by Obama's remarks last week when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize and Monday's address by Clinton on U.S. human rights policy. Both gave prominent mention to Sudan.

Indeed, in their letter, the activists quoted directly from Obama's Nobel speech defending the use of sanctions against "those who violate international laws by brutalising their own people. When there is genocide in Darfur... there must be consequences," he said.

\*Jim Lobe's blog on U.S. foreign policy can be read at <http://www.ips.org/blog/jimlobe/>.

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